

A
GENERAL VIEW
OF THE
COAL TRADE OF SCOTLAND,

CHIEFLY THAT OF THE
RIVER FORTH AND MID-LOTHIAN.

TO WHICH IS ADDED,
AN INQUIRY

INTO THE CONDITION OF THE WOMEN WHO CARRY COALS UNDER
GROUND IN SCOTLAND, KNOWN BY THE NAME OF
BEARERS.

WITH AN APPENDIX,

IN WHICH A REVIEW OF THE TRADE IS TAKEN TO THE PRESENT PERIOD,
SINCE THE TREATISE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1808; AND A STATE-
MENT GIVEN OF THE STEPS LATELY TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT,
WITH THE VIEW OF PLACING THE COAL TRADE UNDER AN EX-
CISE: THE EFFECTS OF WHICH ARE FULLY CONSIDERED.

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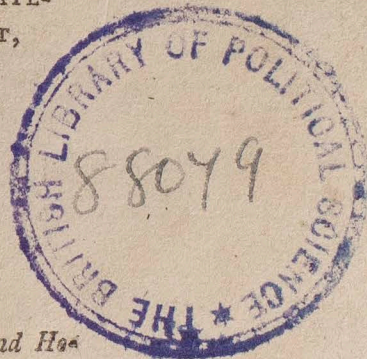
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him considerable labour. This shows how very intricate and involved this department of science is at present, and is an argument for some plan being adopted to correct these dif-

ferences. The importance of this reform to Great Britain is so obvious as to require no comment whatever.

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By James Watson, Esq. of Glasgow, Barrister-at-Law.
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INQUIRY, &c.

HAVING, in the preceding investigation, endeavoured to point out those schemes which appear most likely to contribute to the comfort of individuals, the advancement of our agriculture and manufactures, and the good of the State, we conceive it proper to bring into view the condition of a class in the community, intimately connected with the coal-trade, who endure a slavery scarcely tolerated in the ages of darkness and of barbarism. The class alluded to is that of the women who carry coals under ground, in Scotland,—known by the name of Bearers.

At present there are four modes practised in Scotland, for transporting of coals from the wall-face to the hill.

The

The first, most approved of, and most liberal plan, is to draw the basket of coals from the wall-face to the pit bottom, by means of horses, from whence it is drawn to the hill by machinery. This is practicable in all seams of coal high enough to admit horses, or where height can easily be gained by cutting up part of the pavement, or taking down the roof.

The next method resorted to, when sufficient height cannot be obtained at an easy rate, is to draw the coals in small wheel-carriages, by men, women or boys hired for the purpose, or by the collier himself, as practised in the west country.

In the third mode, the coals are carried by women, known by the name of Bearers, who transport them from the wall-face to the pit-bottom, from whence they are drawn by machinery to the hill.

The fourth and last mode is the most severe and slavish; for the women are not only employed to carry the coals from the wall-face to the pit bottom, but also to ascend with them

them to the hill; no doubt this was the practice in the very early periods of collieries; and it is only wonderful, that such a custom should remain to the present day, in the midst of all our refinements.

This latter mode is unknown in England, and is abolished in the neighbourhood of Glasgow. Seams of coal are there wrought of every thickness; so that no argument can be brought in support of it as a system which is indispensably requisite, in any circumstances.

It is, however, a certain fact, that severe and laborious as this employment is, still there are young women to be found, who, from early habits, have no particular aversion to the work, and who are as cheerful and light in heart as the gayest of the fair sex; and as they have it in their power to betake themselves to other work if they choose, the carrying of coals is a matter of free choice; and therefore, no blame can be particularly attached to the coalmaster. Yet, still it must, even in the most favourable point of view, be looked upon as a very bad, old and disgraceful custom.

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But

But, as married women are also as much engaged in this servitude as the young, it is in this instance that the practice is absolutely injurious and bad, even although they submit to it without repining.

With respect to the labour attending all colliery operations, it is in vain to speak of Utopian schemes of ease and refinement; it is a labour which requires severe bodily exertion, and the sweat of the brow, more than almost any other operation. While this falls to the lot of the men, there is nothing wrong, as it is not particularly prejudicial to their health; but the case is far different with the women.

Let us now take a view of this system, the severity of the labour, and the consequences.

In those collieries where this mode is in practice, the collier leaves his house for the pit about eleven o'clock at night, (attended by his sons, if he has any sufficiently old), when the rest of mankind are retiring to rest. Their first work is to prepare coals, by hewing them down from the wall. In about three
hours

hours after, his wife, (attended by her daughters, if she has any sufficiently grown,) sets out for the pit, having previously wrapped her infant child in a blanket, and left it to the care of an old woman, who, for a small gratuity, keeps three or four children at a time, and who, in their mothers' absence, feeds them with ale or whisky mixed with water. The children who are a little more advanced, are left to the care of a neighbour; and under such treatment, it is surprising that they ever grow up or thrive.

The mother having thus disposed of her younger children, descends the pit with her older daughters, when each, having a basket of a suitable form, lays it down, and into it the large coals are rolled; and such is the weight carried, that it frequently takes two men to lift the burden upon their backs: the girls are loaded according to their strength. The mother sets out first, carrying a lighted candle in her teeth; the girls follow, and in this manner they proceed to the pit bottom, and with weary steps and slow, ascend the

stairs, halting occasionally to draw breath, till they arrive at the hill or pit top, where the coals are laid down for sale; and in this manner they go for eight or ten hours almost without resting. It is no uncommon thing to see them, when ascending the pit, weeping most bitterly, from the excessive severity of the labour; but the instant they have laid down their burden on the hill, they resume their cheerfulness, and return down the pit singing.

The execution of work performed by a stout woman in this way is beyond conception. For instance, we have seen a woman, during the space of time above mentioned, take on a load of at least 170 lbs. avoirdupois, travel with this 150 yards up the slope of the coal below ground, ascend a pit by stairs 117 feet, and travel upon the hill 20 yards more to where the coals are laid down. All this she will perform no less than twenty-four times as a day's work.

The amount of work performed is as follows:

Travelling

Travelling up the slope of the coal load-	
ed,	150 yards.
Returning with the empty basket,	150
Ascending the pit loaded,	39
Descending with the empty bask-	
et,	39
Travelling on the hill loaded,	20
Returning with the empty basket,	20

These distances, multiplied by the number of times the journey is performed, give the following result :

Travelled in a horizontal direction above and	
below ground loaded,	4080 yards.
Travelled with the empty basket,	4080
Ascent of the stair loaded,	936
Descent with the empty basket,	936
	<hr/>
	10032

Of which the loaded distance is, 5016

And the unloaded, - - 5016

Those who are versed in the effective strength of men, will be able to calculate how many yards of horizontal distance are equal to the perpendicular ascent. It is presumed the

proportion would be comparatively great, when we consider that the weight of the body must be added to the weight carried.

The weight of coals thus brought to the pit top by a woman in a day, amounts to 4080 pounds, or above thirty-six hundred-weight English, and there have been frequent instances of two tons being carried.

The wages paid them for this work, are eightpence *per* day!—a circumstance as surprising almost as the work performed.

To many who may read this account of work, the amount of it will not be very obvious, because the depth of the pit and slope of the coal, compared with the same horizontal distance above ground, appear no very great matter.

But, in order to bring the amount of this work to a standard or scale by which it may be compared, we shall take for example, a well known and familiar object, the steeple of St Giles's, Edinburgh, the height of which is 161 feet from the street to the weathercock.

The

The depth of the pit is, as stated, 117 feet.

Perpendicular rise of the slope of the

coal, $\frac{36}{153}$

153

Now, let us suppose, that a scale-stair were carried up from the base of the steeple to this height, which is within eight feet of the weathercock, and a platform made there, and that thirty-six hundred-weight of coals were laid down at the distance of 150 yards from the base,—a coal-bearer would make twenty-four journies to this great height, and lay down upon the platform the whole quantity of coals, or even two tons, upon an extra exertion.

This she would perform, not as the mere effort of a day, after long training, like our celebrated pedestrians, but she would perform the same work, five days each week, and that not for a week, a month or an year, but for years together.

Astonishing as the feats are which have been performed by pedestrians for high betts,

the palm must be yielded to the coal-bearer ; for it is certain, if one of them had the prospect of gaining five guineas, by making a great exertion for one day, the work she would perform would far exceed all that is stated.

There have been instances of their carrying three hundred-weight at once, and of ascending the slope of a coal and pit, equal to 222 feet, which is sixty-one feet higher than St Giles's steeple ; but the particular instance before stated, fell under the observation of the writer.

In short, the height ascended by them, when loaded, is equal to more than four times that of Arthur's Seat above the level of the sea, or to the height of Benlawers in Perthshire, above the level of Loch Tay, the total ascent being 3672 feet.

In those pits which are so deep as to prevent the women from carrying the coals to the hill, the distance from which they bring the coals to the pit bottom may be stated at 280 yards.

This

This journey they will perform thirty times with the weight above mentioned, in the space of ten hours; so that the journey performed each day, is as follows:

Journey when loaded,	-	8400 yards.
Ditto, with the empty basket,		8400
		<hr/>
		16,800
Perpendicular ascent of the slope		
of the coal,	- - -	<hr/> 700

From this view of the work performed by bearers in Scotland, some faint idea may be formed of the slavery and severity of the toil, particularly when it is considered that they are entered to this work when seven years of age, and frequently continue till they are upwards of fifty, or even sixty years old.

The total quantity of coals thus carried by women in one year must be very great, as the quantity in one small county alone, amounted, a few years ago, to no less than 100,000 tons.

The collier, with his wife and children, having performed their daily task, return home, where

where no comfort awaits them ; their clothes are frequently soaked with water, and covered with mud ; their shoes so very bad as scarcely to deserve the name. In this situation they are exposed to all the rigours of winter, the cold frequently freezing their clothes.

On getting home, all is cheerless and devoid of comfort ; the fire is generally out, the culinary utensils dirty and unprepared, and the mother naturally first seeks after her infant child, which she nurses even before her pit clothes are thrown off.

From this incessant labour of the wife, the children are sadly neglected, and all those domestic concerns disregarded, which contribute to render the life of the labourer comfortable and happy. It is presumed, that it is from this habit of life that infectious diseases make in general greater havock among the children of colliers than among those of any other class of labourers, so much so, that we have seen the number of deaths in one year exceed the number of births. Enter their houses ;
these

these will afford ample demonstration of all that is adduced.

This habit of life is also the cause of the money which they earn being spent, without economy; hence they are always in want. No doubt, there are many exceptions to the contrary; but the case now brought forward is too frequently to be found.

How different is the state of matters, where horses are substituted for women, and when the wife of the collier remains at home.

The husband, when he returns from his hard labour with his sons, finds a comfortable house, a blazing fire, and his breakfast ready in an instant, which cheer his heart, and make him forget all the severities of toil; while his wife, by her industry, enables him to procure good clothes and furniture, which constitute the chief riches of this class of the community. A chest of mahogany drawers, and an eight-day clock, with a mahogany case, are the great objects of their ambition; and when the latter is brought home, all their relations and neighbours are invited upon the occasion,

occasion, when a feast is given, and the whole night spent in jovial mirth.

The sentiment of the Poet most aptly applies here, and with peculiar force:—

Let not ambition mock their *useful toil*,
Their *homely joys* nor *destiny obscure*,
Nor grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The desire they have of procuring such articles as above stated, is a great mean of preventing their money being spent in ale-houses, and therefore deserves every praise and encouragement.

It frequently happens, that the mother of a family continues to bear coals even to within two days or twelve hours of her inlying. The mere mentioning of this circumstance is quite enough to any person of the least knowledge or reflection, without particularizing any of the consequences.

Besides the wives and daughters of the colliers, there is another class of women attached to some collieries, termed Framed Bearers,

ers, or, more properly, Fremit Bearers, that is, women who are nowise related to those who employ them. These are at the disposal of the oversman below ground, and he appoints them to carry coals for any person he thinks proper, so that they sometimes have a new master every day: this is slavery complete; and when an unrelenting collier takes an ill-natured fit, he oppresses the bearer with such heavy loads of coal, as are enough to break, not only the spirit, but the back of any human being.

That the women are fully sensible, and feel the severity of their labour, is but too evident, especially to all those who have been accustomed to travel below ground. One case, for example, we shall mention, which occurred.

In surveying the workings of an extensive colliery below ground, a married woman came forward, groaning under an excessive weight of coals, trembling in every nerve, and almost unable to keep her knees from sinking under her. On coming up, she said in a most plaintive and melancholy voice: "O SIR, THIS IS

" SORE,

“ SORE, SORE WORK. I WISH TO GOD THAT
“ THE FIRST WOMAN WHO TRIED TO BEAR
“ COALS HAD BROKE HER BACK, AND NONE
“ WOULD HAVE TRIED IT AGAIN.”

Under such circumstances, who would not feel for their misfortunes, and make every exertion for their relief, in that circle where their influence extends, however limited that circle may be? The mentioning of a few of the circumstances attending this system to the proprietor of an extensive colliery, was the instant means of relieving a number of those women from this terrible slavery,—from this worse than Egyptian bondage.

It is to be hoped, that in a few years the bearing of coals in Scotland will cease to be known. To change the whole system of a colliery at once, would be almost impossible, and highly detrimental to all concerned.

Common prudence suggests, that the change be gradually made, and more particularly as a work which is fitted or established for bearers, requires a new arrangement to fit it for horses. But it is needless to state all the particulars

particulars here, excepting that a horse cannot pull up the rise of a coal to a pit bottom, on account of the great acclivity, being about one yard in five; whereas a cart-road, which has a rise of one yard in twenty, is reckoned steep. A bearer, when loaded, chooses rather to go up the acclivity than go down.

We are apt to declaim against the conduct of the colliers, which is no doubt frequently very cross and troublesome; but what can we expect from men whose wives are kept in such a degraded state? Would mankind in general be any better under similar circumstances? We must not look for miracles. The woman who bears the coals has right to say as much about the price of labour as the husband. Is it any wonder, then, that the combinations they sometimes form are strong? Do we not all acknowledge the very high and extensive influence of women in society? Do we not pay them a ready tribute? Let the condition of this class of women be bettered, and most undoubtedly the best consequences will follow.

There

There are particular situations and circumstances, where bearers may for a few years still be necessary, that is, there may be collieries, where, if the system were at once abandoned, the colliery would cease to be wrought, or at least would be wrought to great disadvantage; as, for instance, in the edge-seams near Edinburgh, where it will require both genius, and a strong and persevering exertion to alter the system; but there is no doubt as to its practicability. The metallic veins are nearly perpendicular; but we have never seen any bearers employed in them. If the present plans were instantly changed, a loss would ensue, not only to the individual, but to the public. In such cases, young women are to be found, who, from early habit, will cheerfully submit to the drudgery; but the married women ought, for a thousand reasons, to be relieved from the bondage. The strongest arguments could be brought forward on this point, but we deem it unnecessary.

Having thus endeavoured to bring into view the state and condition of a class of women
in

in society, whose peculiar situation is but little known to the world, or even to those in whose service they are, it must be remarked that the picture is not placed in too strong a light, considering the darkness of the shades by which it has been obscured. To enter into a more minute detail of the sufferings they undergo, would be a very unpleasant task.

But, to sum up all, the system is severe, slavish, and oppressive in the highest degree, and renders their life the most weary of all the pilgrimages of mankind through this journey of life.

If what has been stated shall tend in the least degree to meliorate their condition, it will be a pleasant reflection to think that some little service has been done to society. And I trust, that the day is not very distant, when the system of bearing coals will be only talked of as a very bad old custom, and when we will blush to hear that such slavery existed in Scotland in the nineteenth century!

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CHAPTER VII

...
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 the system of bearing arms will be only talk-
 ed of as a very bad old custom, and which we
 will blush to hear that such slaves existed in
 Scotland in the nineteenth century!

W. COLEMAN